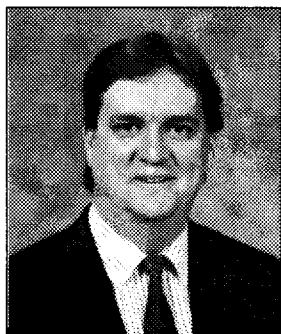


Don't give away personal information!

By Jim Carroll



Jim Carroll is the co-author of the national bestseller, the Canadian Internet Handbook, and author of a new book released in April 1997 entitled *Surviving the Information Age*. A native of Byron—now a suburb of London, Ont.—he attended St. George's School from 1964 to 1971. He can be reached on the Internet at jcarroll@jacc.com, and has an on line site containing many other articles concerning the Internet on the World Wide Web at <http://www.jacc.com>. He welcomes your comments.



ave you thought about the fact that you might be giving away your personal privacy by using the Internet?

To me, it has become obvious that far too many of us who use the Internet are giving away far too much personal information without thinking about what we are doing—and without considering what might be happening with this information.

This is an issue which has really come to bug me in the last few months, as I see an increasing number of business organizations which build Web sites that require the visitor to provide some extremely personal information from visitors. The problem is that they do not provide any type of indication as what they plan to do with such information.

And I find that an ever growing number of Canadians blindly surf the World Wide Web, giving away all kinds of personal stuff, without really thinking about what it is they have done.

Spend a little bit of time surfing the Web, and you can find all kinds of large institutions involved in this kind of insidious behaviour. Take the popular CANOE Web site (<http://www.canoe.ca/>). Owned and supported by such multibillion dollar organizations such as Rogers and BCE, it features information from the *Financial Post* and a host of other newspapers and magazines. And it offers a great little service—you can set up a customized investment profile, so that you can track the value of your investments on a day-to-day basis.

This sounds like a great idea—supposing, of course, that you are fortunate enough to have investments! You can sign in every day and see the market value of your actual holdings, based on the previous day's stock market prices. Visit the site, fill out the form with information on what you own, and include a few details like your name and address. Boom—you have a nifty investment tracker.

Except you probably have not thought about what you have just done here—you have just told the nice folks at these companies all about the stocks and bonds that you own, as

well as how much money you make.

Now the cable company and the telephone company have access to some very personal data about you. What are they going to do with this information? How do you know they will not misuse it, sell it, or provide it to other third parties without your consent. How do you know they will not use it to send some telemarketer after you? Heck, how do you know they will not set it up on a Web site somewhere! You have told them some personal information—and they have guaranteed you nothing in terms of their plans for it!

Such services are not necessarily few and far between—I am seeing more of them each and every day. Take the new service from Canada Newswire (<http://www.newswire.ca/>), a company that distributes press releases on behalf of large corporate and government organizations. They feature a nifty new service that lets you receive directly any press releases from specific companies that you are interested in. A wonderful new capability—but to take part, you are expected to fill out a form telling these nice folks your name, address, your career, and how much money you make, as well as the size of your investment portfolio. Is this information any of their business? I think not—so why are they asking for it?

And then travel over to FundLib (<http://www.fundlib.com/>), an online mutual fund site. It, too, features a great service to track the value of your mutual fund holdings each day. To take part, you fill out a form listing all your mutual fund assets. What have you really done? You have just told every mutual fund company in Canada exactly what it is you own. Expect a lot of calls from salesmen.

These are not isolated situations—I find that more and more, the corporate sites I am visiting are requesting me to hand over all kinds of personal information. They do not tell me what they intend to do with it, how they plan to safeguard the information, and offer me no assurances that they will not share it with other companies, people or institutions.

Continued on page 45

Continued from page 25

Some Excellent Government Web Sites

Adult Education and Training Information Service
<http://www.info.london.on.ca/aetis/>
 Career Management Skills, by Information London
<http://www.info.london.on.ca/employ/emplinks.html#career>
 Employment and Training Advisory Committee
<http://www.info.london.on.ca/disabled/etac.html>
 London Unemployment Help Centre
<http://www.luhc.org/>
 WIL—Counselling and Training for Employment
<http://www.execulink.com/~wil/>

Information London's Adult Education and Training Information Service lists job training, career counselling, English language training, computer training and financial aid services. Information London has also compiled career management links to help with résumés, cover letters, job interviews, and other aspects of your job search.

Job seekers with disabilities can find a "directory of employment-related programs for people with disabilities" on the Employment and Training Advisory Committee site.

The London Unemployment Help Centre offers free help with job search techniques, career advice and job placement.

WIL offers several services for women and men entering the workforce, as well as for businesses and employers.

Web a useful...

Continued from page 20

you are a techie who is working in any area related to network operations or programming. In that case, move it up to one-half of your time)." Keep your perspective and you will find a lot of guidance on the Internet and maybe even one of those 270,000 new jobs. 

Brad Dishan (bdishan@lon.hookup.net) is a London-based freelance writer and researcher. A graduate of the University of Western Ontario's Graduate School of Library and Information Science, he is currently one of the many participants in the great Canadian job hunt.

Programs for women include "office skills," "customer service," and English-language training.

Have shin splints from pounding the pavement been replaced by repetitive strain injury from "mousing" as the occupational hazard of job hunting? Don't forget to take a break and network with some real live humans. Good luck on your job search! 

WHO DO YOU CALL
WHEN YOU
DON'T KNOW
WHO TO CALL?

START
HERE



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INFORMATION
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Continued from page 46

And frankly, I do not trust them. The world of business is littered with broken promises in which personal freedoms have come secondary to corporate initiatives. I don't think any of us should be so naive as to think that this information will not be misused.

So what do I do? One of two things—either I tell all of these sites that request such personal information as my salary that my name is Bill Gates and that I earn several billions of dollars per year—or I refuse to use them.

What is really needed in Canada is a corporate code of conduct with respect to the collection, use and maintenance of private information to be found on the Internet. 

What you don't know
CAN hurt you!

Do you need to find...

- Corporate information (Competitive Intelligence)
- Medical research
- Scientific publications
- Technical literature
- Patents/Trademarks
- Financial disclosures

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